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A Revolutionary Inspiration: Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* and *Ann'quin Bredouille* by Jean-Claude Gorjy

The years 1791–92 saw the publication, in Paris, of a novel enigmatically entitled *Ann'quin Bredouille*, by a certain Jean-Claude Gorjy.[1] Like many other contemporary novels, it went unnoticed and immediately fell into oblivion. Very little is known about its author, Jean-Claude Gorjy (1753 or 1755–95). He is first mentioned by Charles Monselet, and described by the epithet "*un lézard littéraire*" (Monselet 1864: 229). While Gorjy's oeuvre is fairly sparse, it is distinctly marked by a fascination with Laurence Sterne. Gorjy made his debut in 1784, with a book *Nouveau voyage sentimental* (New Sentimental Journey), which was not unsuccessful. Thus, he joined the ranks of Sterne's imitators who wished to use both Sterne's narrative pattern, linking barely connected scenes, stories, digressions and comments, as well as the sentimental tonality, which went on to become a solid staple of French literature in the 1780s. *A Sentimental Journey* influenced also other works written by Gorjy during the Revolution: *Tablettes sentimentales du bon Pamphile pendant les mois d'Août, Septembre, Octobre et Novembre en 1789* (1791) and the novel which is the focus of this paper, *Ann'quin Bredouille*. Altogether Gorjy's output comprises, apart from the above-mentioned books, three sentimental novels of manners (*Blançay*, 1787; *Victorine*, 1789; *Saint-Alme* 1790) and a mediaeval pseudo-chronicle, *Lidorie* (1790).

Jean-Claude Gorjy's work was rescued from oblivion in the last two decades of the twentieth century. It attracted academic interest because of features typical of sentimental literature (Denby 1994: 25–40), as well as the critique of the Great French Revolution in his last two books (Cook 1982, 1993; Coulet 1983; Denby 1990; Krief 2010).

[1] *Ann'quin Bredouille ou le petit cousin de Tristram Shandy. Oeuvre posthume de Jacqueline Lycurgues, actuellement fifre-major au greffe des menus Derviches*, Paris, Guillot et Cuchet (vol. I–V); Paris, Louis, 1792 (vol. I–VI). All references in this article are to the latter.

Ann'quin Bredouille, Gorjy's last novel, undoubtedly deserves closer attention than any of his other works. It is a remarkable book, all the more so because it defied contemporary tastes and since what proved to have inspired it was *Tristram Shandy*. While Sterne's novel was translated into French in the 18th century,[2] it was not received so enthusiastically as *A Sentimental Journey* earlier. To date, the only known 18th-century French novel to have been inspired by *Tristram Shandy* is Denis Diderot's *Jacques le fataliste*.[3]

It is worth noting that on the publication of *Tablettes sentimentales* Gorjy transformed his writing into a far more radical form and different aesthetic category, namely, the comic. He seems to have decided that, in the ever less clement political climate, the sentimental narrative and structural paradigm (Denby 1994: 4) no longer suit his need to express his stance against the reality of the Revolution.

The influence of *Tristram Shandy* is immediately evident on the level of para-text. The novel's full title, *Ann'quin Bredouille. Le petit cousin de Tristram Shandy*, is a direct reference to Sterne. The "little cousin," pointing to one of the protagonists rather than the narrator of the novel, suggests to the reader that the elements to pay attention to are the form of the work and its particular type of composition and narration. The influence of Sterne's composition is also acknowledged by a most original preface, consisting solely of letters, lower and higher case, and punctuation marks. It is reproduced in its entirety below (after Angelet 2003: 288).

PRÉFACE
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[2] *Tristram Shandy* had a few translations into French in the 18th century. In 1776, the four first volumes were published, translated by Joseph-Pierre Frénais; 1785 saw the publication of two translations of *Suite de la vie et des opinions de Tristram Shandy*, one by Marquis de Bonnay (Volland publishers), another by Griffet de la Baume (Buisson publishers). The first faithful translation was the work of Léon de Wailly (1848). See Bandry 2003: 250.

[3] Diderot's novel was published in France in 1796, therefore Gorjy could not have known it.

This text can be interpreted to mean a number of things. First of all, the form points to an inspiration by Sterne: the play with typography, with letters and characters replacing discourse rather than constituting it (Cook 1982: 287). It can also be interpreted as a comradely wink to the reader, a mockery of the sombre prefaces which were obligatory in the novels of the 18th century. The preface might also be read as a kind of invitation, inciting the reader to join the author in decoding cryptic meanings: after all, the punctuation marks used lavishly in the preface are quite suggestive: of some things remaining unsaid (ellipsis), of intensity of emotions (exclamation marks) and uncertainty (question marks). Lastly, this extraordinary little text can be perceived in a wholly new light when read as an introduction to a particularly mordant satire on the political reality of the first three years of the French Revolution.

The form of *Ann'quin Bredouille* is marked by latitude bordering on chaos. The novel consists of six volumes, called *fagots*; each chapter is preceded by a title and a humorous summary of the contents. The story is told in a nonchalant and unpredictable manner, as if the author wanted to prove that he was absolutely free from the pressures of the current situation. However, the opening and the ending, two strategically placed elements of any text, clearly suggest that the story is suspended between the apparently missing chapters at the beginning and the epilogue, making it look like the book was subjected to censorship by the author. The novel opens with chapter XXXVII, with the narrator sharing the information that the preceding thirty-six are locked "*sous les scellés de l'Aréopage du Mont-Aventin, dans un porte-feuille rouge, à compartiments bleus, fermés avec des rubans blancs*" (I: 1).[4] And in the last pages of the novel we see the uncle tossing the manuscript of the sequel into the fire.

Ann'quin Bredouille is a comic work through and through; however, it is not easy to define its particular brand of humour, as the novel encompasses several kinds. Perhaps it could be termed complex humour, with the predominance of satire (Dziemidok 1967: 88, 92). This means that the humour in *Ann'quin Bredouille* is mainly intellectual and serious, in that it serves a specific function: it seeks to reform, to improve and to give a warning. It can also be seen as a reaction to a reality the author thought absurd. Finally, "laughing through one's tears" has the power to divert one's attention from misery, or to blunt or to mask fear (Gołaszewska 1987: 16). In this novel, satire, with its didactic message, is interspersed with pure merriment whose aim is to provoke laugher and thus to relax.

[4] It is worthwhile to take note of the colours (blue-white-red), clearly pointing to the colours assumed as national by the French Revolution. All quotations from Gorjy's novel are followed by the volume (in Roman numerals) and page number(s).

The humour in *Ann'quin Bredouille* can be analysed on two levels: that of the story (*histoire*) and that of the narrative (*récit*). The former presents a distorted, caricature image of the France of the first years of the Revolution; the latter concentrates on the play with fiction, which also serves to determine the relationship between the author and the reader.

Before we go on to analyse the narrative of *Ann'quin Bredouille*, let us present a brief summary of the story. This seems no mean feat, as it is hard to summarise a novel without a coherent plot. The four protagonists, Jacqueline Lycurgues (the narrator), her jovial uncle Ann'quin Bredouille, the grouchy Madame Jer'nifle and the clever young man Adule,[5] travel through the land of Néomanie which is torn by the fierce fighting between the Altidors (i.e., the aristocracy) and the Surtalons (i.e., the third estate). The loosely connected scenes, dialogues and situations are occasionally adorned by sentimental little stories so much beloved by the reading public of that age. The journey through a land obsessed with novelty (hence the name *Néomanie*) is a valid opportunity to present bizarre situations and to caricature uncanny devices and pseudo-inventions. The butt of the satire is the political and social reality of that time, wholesale. Gorjy believes that it is tainted with anarchy and an obsessive desire for novelty. His stance is that of an ardent royalist and advocate of the *ancien régime*, which is attested to by his symbolic portrayal of France and his compassion for the persecuted king and queen. He portrays France as a "Babel ship," whose captain proves weak and helpless in the face of a raging storm. All things revolutionary are ruthlessly rejected by Gorjy, by means of satire, mockery, caricature. Néomanie is a stage where many stupefying scenes take place, but for lack of space we cannot go into details. What has to be stressed, however, is a certain leitmotif which makes the humour of Gorjy's work unique: throughout the novel the author laments the loss of joy, which he portrays as the allegorical character of "dame de Liesse." To their dismay, the protagonists find that the dame, who had been part of the life of the French for centuries, simply left, never to return: "*Pauvre chère dame de Liesse ! Est-ce donc pour toujours que vous avez abandonné ce peuple, l'enfant de votre prédilection? . . . Hélas! . . . Hélas! . . . Hélas! . . .*" (III: 121–3). According to Gorjy, old-time joy, simple and natural, can no longer be known. He refuses to accept the tone of dead seriousness, forced on the nation by the revolutionaries. He also refuses to accept "patriotic laughter," that "simple folk's laughter, healthy and pure,"

[5] The characters' names are meaningful: the narrator is named after Lycurgus, the law-giver of Sparta; Jer'nifle means someone distrustful and Adule, "flatterer"; as for the name of the uncle, the element "Bredouille" can mean someone who will not achieve the desired goal. I am grateful to Marzena Chrobak for her suggestions for the translation of these names.

close to the laugh of children, as something very far removed from the merriment of the aristocracy (Richardot 2002: 169–70).

"*Si on me laissait, comme à Sancho Pança, le choix de mon royaume, il ne serait pas maritime; ce ne serait pas non plus un royaume de nègres, dont je pusse faire de l'argent : non, je choisirais un royaume de bons rieurs*" (IV: 104): this statement, quoted after *Tristram Shandy*, is a perfect expression of Gorjy's own mind.[6] Néomanie is the exact opposite of that dream. And the humour in *Ann'quin Bredouille* becomes increasingly distant from the merry notes on which the first volume closes: the "allegro ma non troppo" with a "text" which goes "Pa ta pan pan pan, din din din . . ." This kind of merriment, with no secondary meanings, drawn from *Tristram Shandy* (*Lillibullero,* vol. I, chapter XXI), is impossible, if not outright dangerous, which some of the characters in Gorjy's outlandish tale learn firsthand.

The author not only satirises the surface of events, but looks into their mechanisms and driving forces: above anything else, however, he is concerned with the so-called "public opinion" which, by means of rumour blown out of all proportion by the press, incites crowds to revolt; one of his other major concerns is the absurd, irrational functioning of the revolutionary justice. The sources of satire in this novel are manifold. Gorjy's favourite instruments as a satirist are the grotesque, the hyperbole. which can make a caricature of virtually anything, and allegory. He also plays with neologisms, clumsy word deformations and the degeneration of their semantic value. But this brand of humour is indebted to the tradition of such writers as Rabelais, Swift and Voltaire rather than Sterne (Krief 2004: 83–98).

Gorjy's particular interest lies in two aspects of the reality of the revolution: firstly, its new-fangled language (or newspeak) and its usage, which is highly significant for the political life, and closely connected to journalism and the art of oratory; secondly, the all-pervasive suspiciousness, entailing slander, trials in court and long prison sentences.

The author's primary concern is language, which is especially endangered by the "mania of the new." Gorjy exposes what lies behind the facade of linguistic "innovation:" by means of "newspeak" the revolutionaries force upon the citizens a certain mode of thinking and interpreting the immediate reality:

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[6] In *Tristram Shandy* the fragment in question goes as follows: "Was I left like *Sancho Pança*, to chuse my kingdom, it should not be maritime – or a kingdom of blacks to make a penny of – no, it should be a kingdom of hearty laughing subjects . . ." (vol. IV, chapter XXXII: pp. 303–4). Quoted after: Sterne, Laurence. *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*. Ed. Gunter Jurgensmeier. Munich: 2005. The information in brackets indicates the book, the chapter (in Roman numerals) and the page numer(s).

(On a) subverti toutes les idées;
Jeté dans toutes les âmes le plus dangereux venin, l'esprit de parti;
Remplacé la qualité par le nombre, la justice par la force, les demandes par des menaces, les arguments par des torches, les jugements par des exécutions;
Les.....par.....
Les.....par.....
Les.....par..... (V: 152–3).

Gorjy condemns public speakers, "functionaries" of the revolution, "hacks" and "*liseurs en plein vent*" ("those reading aloud"), as submissive. Journalists, along with the public speakers, are responsible for the confusion in the Frenchmen's minds:

Quelles terribles disputes les mots n'ont-ils pas occasionnées et perpétuées! Quels torrents d'encre et de fiel n'ont-ils pas fait couler! . . . Hélas! on vous a peut-être traîné quelquefois au lieu de la grande parlerie. Quelle abondance de paroles sur des mots qui n'ont point de signification déterminée, et que personne n'entend! (V: 148–9)

In these words one can hear an echo of Sterne's warning, "how much of thy own knowledge, discourse, and conversation has been pestered and disordered, at one time or other, by this, and this only . . ." (vol. II, ch. II: 78), augmented by the political meaning of the utterance.

Gorjy points to something worse still, the worst thing of all: the danger inherent in the infatuation with "the new language," which makes people blind to manipulation and deliberate sowing of discord. Gorjy seems to counterbalance the revolutionary free play with language with his own. In *Ann'quin Bredouille*, words undergo various experiments: apart from neologisms, the novel is rich in striking deformations, odd collocations and phrases, and allusive semantic transformations. The overall effect is highlighted by the sheer power of accumulation of words. There is a strong impression of logorrhea: it looks as if the author wanted to overpower the reader with the torrent of words, just like the speakers for the revolution. That is his revenge for the detested revolutionary eloquence, a revenge based on a funny *argumentum fistulatorium*.[7]

It was presumably the attitude of Sterne's character of uncle Toby, who breaks any discussion by whistling a few bars of *Lillibullero*, that is behind Gorjy's striking idea of "*turlutaine* playing," which deserves a brief comment. The word *turlutaine* is a combination of two words, and thus two senses: *turlurette* means "flute" or "pipe," and *turlutaine* is a name for obsessive repetition of a phrase or tune. Another element is the onomatopoeic word *turlututu!*, used to express mocking protest. What is, in *Tristram Shandy*, a funny feature of

[7] See *Tristram Shandy*, vol. I, chapter XXI.

uncle Toby's (the whistling of *Lillibullero*), in Gorjy's novel becomes a political issue. Playing the *turlutaine* means here an objection to the deafening din of the revolution, metaphorically described by the author as "horn-sounding of such force that's enough to burst the eardrums" (I: 36–7). *Turlutaine*, a simple and old-fashioned tune, amounts to an average citizen's protest against the "new" discourse and order being forced upon him.

The other aspect of the reality of the Revolution which Gorjy seeks to condemn is the atmosphere of suspicion and distrust in which the French have to live, as a consequence of the oppressive, authoritarian rule of the leaders of the Revolution. In one of the chapters of *Ann'quin Bredouille* there is a scene depicting smoking the pipe in company: the characters do just that, with no hidden agenda: "*dégagés du soin de diriger cette opération mécanique, chacun de nous s'abandonnait librement à ses réflexions*" (III: 171). The pipe, an attribute of uncle Toby's in *Tristram Shandy* (vol. III, ch. XXIV: 190), an object he never stirs without and which makes him seem likeable and harmless, is an element of a threatening situation in Gorjy's novel. Chapter 166 consists solely of the title *Résultat de beaucoup de séances* (III, ch. 166); in the next chapter there is talk of impending threat to all:

> *Si jamais la San-Hermandad en avait connaissance! . . . Vous ne voyez pas d'ici toutes les inductions que sa perspicacité tirerait de cette fumée-là? . . . Et ce titre de votre chapitre: beaucoup de séances; que de soupçons cela peut faire naître! Des séances! Donc il y avait des assemblées; de ces assemblées il est résulté de la fumée, donc . . .* (III: 172–5)

Another trick of Sterne's – a blank page, or piece of paper – becomes in Gorjy's novel something akin to a dangerous crime, and almost causes the protagonists' imprisonment. A blank piece of paper circulates in Néomanie, creating a lot of disquiet: everyone tries writing on it, before finally somebody denounces it before an ominous tribunal (called, in the Voltairesque manner, the inquisitional San-Hermandad) as a product of a dangerous conspiracy: "*En un clin d'œil la terreur s'est emparée de tous les esprits, la menace a été dans toutes les bouches*" (IV: 31). Jacqueline Lycurgues must stand before the tribunal to explain. The judges, who received a certain version of the incident beforehand, are reluctant to believe that what she says is true: "*il faut qu'il y ait là quelque dessous de cartes . . . il est impossible que vous n'ayez pas eu une intention*," they conclude (IV: 41–2). Finally, owing to Adule's gift of persuasion, the judges change their minds: in the next edition "*ce feuillet blanc sera consacré à célébrer [leur] clémence, [leur] impartialité, [leur] esprit, en un mot, toutes les qualités qui [leur] valent l'admiration universelle*" (IV: 44–5). Apparently, in

an atmosphere of suspicion silence can be as dangerous as the penchant for indiscriminating talk.

Gorjy is not adverse to "playing with typography," after *Tristram*. What he resorts to particularly often are various ways of eliminating the text: from elided fragments of dialogue or passages from a scene, to cutting chapters to dropping them altogether. In this novel such procedures are seldom play for play's sake: they keep reminding the reader of censorship and self-censorship. What is unsaid really cannot be expressed, mainly for fear of persecution. The most spectacular example is the ending of the novel (or, more precisely, its suspension). The narrator informs the reader:

> *Il s'est passé bien des choses, dont le résultat a été que notre bon locandier a pris enfin son parti* ....

Here uncle Bredouille throws the manuscripts into the fire.

> *Adieu donc; cher lecteur. Veuille le ciel vous envoyer un avenir qui vous dédommage de tous les maux dont j'ai été témoin!* ..... *Mais* .... *Car* ..... *Oh mon Dieu! Entends, exauce les vœux de la véritable philanthropie.* (VI: 142)

It may be surmised that the "*bon locandier*" is the author himself, hurriedly abandoning his work, although it isn't clear why: whether he fears actual repressions or only wishes to create such an illusion.

The influence of *Tristram Shandy* is most evident on the level of narrative, in the frequent digressions and meta-text comments. The narrator often asks the reader to pardon her "garrulousness" (*bavardage*) and to be patient. However, she stresses more than once that the apparent nonchalance is a mask for a carefully planned structure of the novel: "*J'ai souvent l'air de battre la campagne, mais je ne perds pas de vue mon objet. J'y tiens toujours par des fils imperceptibles, et j'y reviens au moment où on y compte le moins*" (III: 103–4). The reader who would like to complain about it must bear in mind that otherwise he would not gain access to the true meaning of the novel: "*Souvenez-vous enfin que c'est la faute de votre paresse, si vous en restez à l'écorce*" (IV: 193–4).

The narrator's recurring digression on playing with fiction can give the impression of a kind of "narrative coquettishness." The author of *Ann'quin Bredouille*, however, is interested not so much in the insider's secrets of fiction writing as in establishing and maintaining contact with the reader. This contact is marked by *distanciation*, as defined by Henri Coulet:

> *Nous appellerons* distanciation *l'ensemble des procédés par lesquels l'auteur d'une fiction en prose se détache de son œuvre et invite lecteur à s'en détacher, par exemple en ironisant sur les personnages, en commentant leur comportement d'une façon qui lui ôte toute vraisemblance, en interrompant le récit par des digressions personnelles, ou encore en dévoilant la fabrication, en faisant participer le lecteur à l'élaboration de l'œuvre.* (Coulet 1970: 438)

In *Ann'quin Bredouille* the distance concerns not so much the fictional world as the world outside the novel, shared by the author and his contemporary readers: "the pact with the reader" is therefore more mimetic than aesthetic.

The "dialogues" between the narrator and the reader deal with the question of survival in a world which has become dangerous and unpredictable. The understanding between the two parties is based on the minimalist agenda of keeping as low a profile as possible, refraining from talk and action, waiting until things get back to normal. As Jacqueline Lycurgues advises, "*La prudence prescrit le rôle de l'in exitu. Ayons donc des yeux, et ne voyons pas; une bouche, et taisons-nous, ou ne l'ouvrons que pour chanter avec les autres*" (III: 127). Fearing denunciation, she begs the reader to forget her grief caused by the loss of Dame de Liesse: "*Croyez-moi, retournons à la fête, sans dire mot. Au contraire dissimulons nos regrets sur Madame de Liesse, et feignons de croire que nous la retrouvons dans le personnage qui veut la remplacer*" (III: 126). One of the ways to avoid getting in trouble with the new authorities, therefore, is to pretend to be submissive: this is the conformist agenda that the author seems to suggest to his contemporaries.

The play with fiction, then, is usually the play with danger and censorship. The contact between author and reader is marked by the reality of the Revolution: it is the contact between people who can understand cryptic language riddled with enigmas, allusions, ironic understatements, hidden meanings, anagrams and allegories. This "pact with the reader" is typical of philosophical tales which "reach those who are already convinced" (Coulet 1970: 439).

The most original aspect of *Ann'quin Bredouille* is the juxtaposition of the "sentimental journey" model with the narrative model inspired by *Tristram Shandy*, aiming to present a mocking picture of the events and reality of the French Revolution. The effect is astonishing: on the one hand, the author's use of parody, mockery and derision results in the novel's amounting to "*le pamphlet le plus mordant, le plus téméraire, le plus acharné, le plus spirituel, le plus terrible qui ait jamais été dirigé contre la Révolution française*" (Monselet 1864: 236). On the other, the narrative model inspired by *Tristram Shandy*,

i.e. the narrative as a friendly chat, makes the author-reader relationship truly human, rich in the kind of character and behaviour traits which are always of little importance in light of Big Historical Events. The play with fiction becomes a panacea for all the evil in the world, and the narrator's statement: "*Je juge les choses indépendamment des personnes et des partis. J'admire la vertu, quelque part qu'elle soit placée. Le crime me révolte, dans quelque circonstances qu'il soit commis*" (VI: 21–2) can be read as the stance of the author of the novel himself, who repeatedly voices in its pages his attitude, called *modérantisme* in those days. At the same time, it reflects a deeply engrained feature of Sterne's narrative, the interweaving of laughter with feeling, as in Tristram's own definition of "Shandeism":

> True *Shandeism,* think what you will against it, opens the heart and lungs, and like all those affections which partake of its nature, it forces the blood and other vital fluids of the body to run freely thro' its channels, and makes the wheel of life run long and cheerfully round. (vol. IV, ch. XXXII: 303)

This phenomenon is related to a most interesting aspect of humour, owing to which Gorjy exposes a number of mechanisms of modern autocracy, primarily the manipulation of the citizens' minds by means of discourse with the prerogatives of power. Gorjy not only manages to capture the nature of this danger, but also proposes a way of making oneself immune to it: laughter, a full-bellied laugh, more effective even than satire and derision. The *turlututu!* that rescues the protagonists whenever their lives are in danger reminds us that even if we are powerless to change a hostile reality, we definitely can create a bit of mental comfort for ourselves. Laugher acts as *catharsis*: evil is momentarily under control and danger is no longer imminent. Joining in laughter, the author and the reader celebrate a joint victory over the fear of persecution and death. Even if the laugh is not free from bitterness, it still creates a genuine space of internal freedom.

The narrator of *Ann'quin Bredouille* keeps evoking Tristram Shandy as a moral role model. In the last volume, during the discussion of the tale's alleged coming to an end, Jacqueline Lycurgues defends the author and quotes "a note found in Tristram Shandy's posthumous papers":

> *Ce qui m'amusait le plus, était ce nombre de lecteurs pénétrants, qui jugeaient que mes extravagantes lubies contenaient un sens mystique, dont ils se targuaient de dévoiler la sublime profondeur . . . Il y a plus encore: des jurés-experts devineurs d'énigmes prétendaient pouvoir suivre ma trace à travers chaque volume . . . Quelquefois, il est vrai, je cours les champs et les grands chemins, sans autre projet que celui du bienfait*

> *de l'air et de la liberté. Mais un objet de pitié se présente-t-il à moi, je l'offre aussitôt à la pitié publique . . . Nous exprimons bien ce que nous sentons vivement; et, dans un pareil sujet, l'écrivain a une double énergie, il soulage son cœur, en plaidant pour les autres.* (VI: 46–8)

The above utterance, which Gorjy ascribes to a fictional character of Sterne's, is in tune with the many "general truths" with which *Ann'quin Bredouille* is peppered. The narrative, generously infused with "Shandeism," mollifies the virulence of the novel's attacks, simultaneously reminding the reader that the world of humans is not made up of clear-cut categories. "*La vraie sensibilité rit aussi aisément qu'elle pleure*" (III: 40): this statement might as well have been penned by the author of *Tristram Shandy*.

Jean-Claude Gorjy revered Sterne as a great master: "*un grand maître qui n'aura jamais que de minces écoliers*" (IV: 107). With his last novel, however, Gorjy proved that he was not a "minor" apprentice after all.

Translated by Agnieszka Pokojska

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